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ABSTRACT

"Experience and Education" (John Dewey, 1938) serves as a foundation piece of literature when discussing experiential learning. To facilitate a better understanding, a conceptual model was developed. In John Dewey's experiential learning theory, everything occurs within a social environment. Knowledge is socially constructed and based on experiences. This knowledge should be organized in real-life experiences that provide a context for the information. The teacher's role is to organize this content and to facilitate the actual experiences. The experiences are based on the capabilities and readiness of the learners. The quality of the experience is the primary component of the theory. Upon completion of the experience, learners have the knowledge and ability to apply it to differing situations. Thus, they have created new knowledge and are at a different level of readiness for continued acquisition and construction of new knowledge. Includes a figure and a reference. (BT)

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An Interpretation Of Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory

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An Interpretation of Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory

T. Grady Roberts

Experience and Education (Dewey, 1938) serves as a foundation piece of literature when discussing experiential learning. Upon study of this text, several important concepts emerge as central to Dewey's philosophy of experiential education. To facilitate a better understanding, a conceptual model was developed and is presented below (see Figure 1).

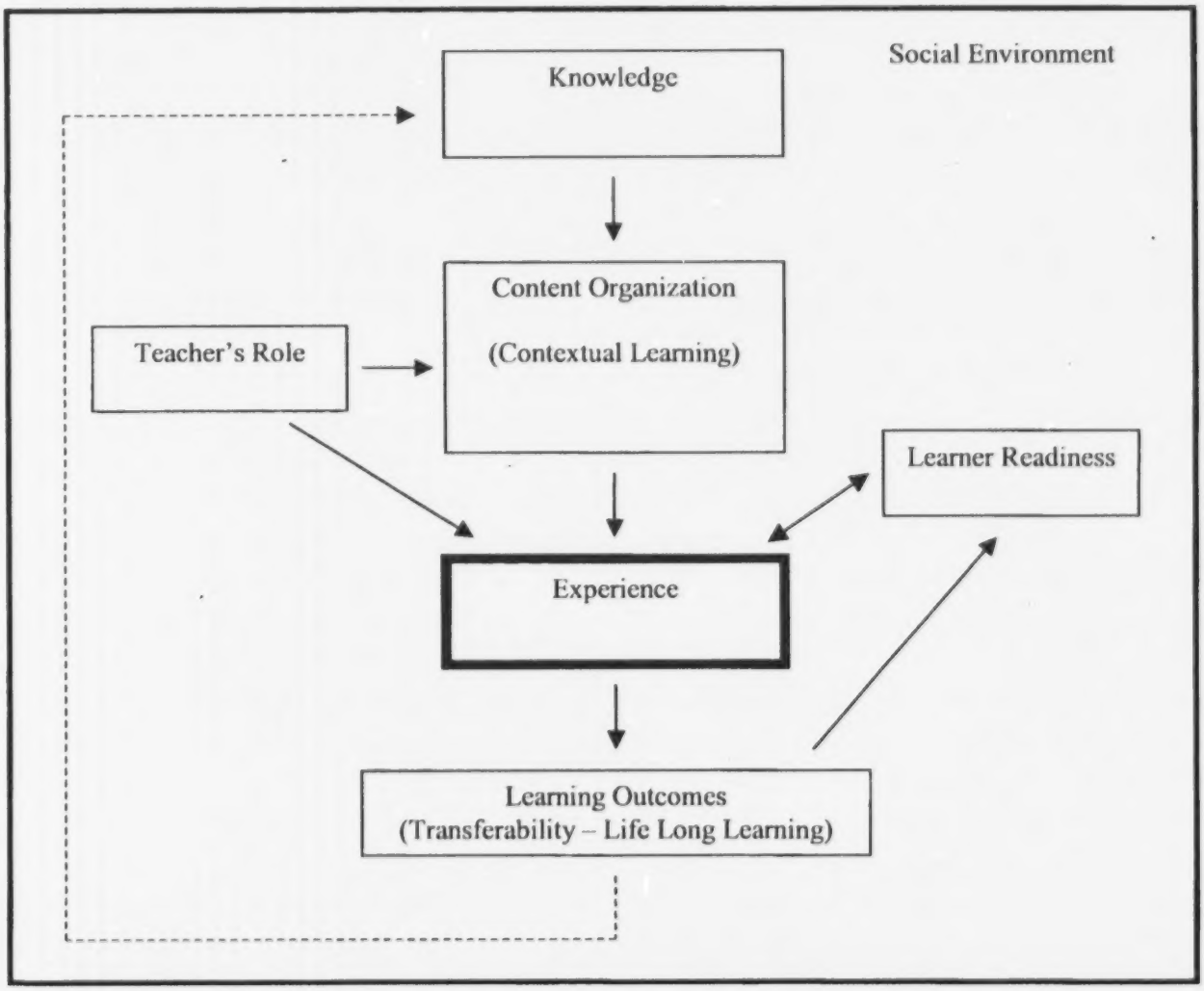

Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of Dewey's Philosophy of Experiential Education

Paramount to Dewey's philosophy is that everything occurs within a social environment. As such, the model presented above is enclosed with a box that represents the social environment. Within this box, the model begins with knowledge, which is organized by the teacher into logical content pieces. The teacher also facilitates the students' experience with the content based on student readiness. The outcome of this experience is learning, which contributes to learner readiness and knowledge, thus allowing the process to begin again.

Social Environment

Dewey asserts that all human experience is social and involves contact and communication. Therefore, humans are a social being that only exist within a social environment. Living and interacting within a social environment has fostered the development of mankind into the complex entity that it is today. This includes the present body of knowledge, which is the focus of the educational system. Dewey explains that people live in a world surrounded by people and other things that are a result of previous human experiences. These combined experiences construct knowledge, as we know it.

The social nature of mankind is also critical for education. "The principle that development of experience comes about through interaction means that education is essentially a social process" (Dewey, 1938, p.58). However, education often has not understood the value of the social nature of students. Dewey argues that traditional education has a "pattern of organization" that consists of schedules, rules, and procedures, which inhibit student learning. In contrast, Dewey's *Progressive Education*, advocates increased social interaction within schools. As such, he argues that there should be careful planning to nurture social relationships. These social relationships can also facilitate greater interaction between mature and immature people.

The responsibility of educating students goes beyond the teacher and involves the entire social system. The notion that it takes a village to raise a child is consistent with Dewey's experiential learning theory. Therefore, when discussing Dewey's philosophy of experiential education, the social environment within which education takes place is critical. The social environment affects all other aspects of the educational process.

Knowledge

The nature of knowledge is critical to Dewey's experiential learning theory. He saw significant discrepancies in how traditional education viewed knowledge and how it should be viewed in experiential learning. Dewey's supposition was that in traditional education knowledge consists of bodies of information and skills that have been worked out in the past. The role of a school is to pass this knowledge to children. Therefore, traditional education imposes education from above and outside. One such method is learning by acquisition from what is in books. The life experiences of students are irrelevant to the acquisition of knowledge. Therefore, in traditional education knowledge is something that is predetermined and controlled beyond the influence of the students. The goal is for students to accumulate as much knowledge as possible to prepare them for their future endeavors.

In contrast, progressive education, or experiential learning provides for learning from the opportunities of the present as opposed to learning for a remote future. Knowledge is what students learn from their experiences. The past is not the *end* of education; it is merely a *means* to help teach about the present. In traditional education, content is organized by mature people and is outside of the present life experience of the immature. Dewey argues that this external

control should be rejected. The true source of educational control is found within the experience of students.

Content Organization

Dewey was very critical on how content is organized in traditional education. He argued that organizing content into isolated subjects gives students difficulties in integrating their knowledge into real life situations. Therefore, traditional education often does not allow learners to grasp the relationship between the content and real life situations. However, placing students into real life situations allows them to learn from their experiences and gain knowledge that they can apply later in different situations. Thus, the basic skills necessary for being a productive citizen (such as reading, writing, and arithmetic) are best presented within the context of an experience in contrast to stand-alone lessons.

Beyond the basic subjects of reading, writing, and arithmetic, Dewey also advocated teaching science. As with other academic subjects, Dewey said that scientific information should be presented in terms of everyday occurrences. His position was that using present life experiences to teach science would allow students to gain a wider understanding of the world. Thus, his theory of experiential learning and organizing content around real life situations is equally applicable to all knowledge areas.

Teacher's Role

Although not a distinct section of the text, Dewey spent a considerable effort in *Experience and Education* outlining the role of a teacher. A central theme in Dewey's experiential learning theory is that the role of the educator is to facilitate appropriate experiences

that engage students. In experiential learning, "the teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities" (Dewey, 1938, p.59). In contrast, Dewey asserts that in traditional education, the teacher starts with existing knowledge and ladles it out to students.

A key component to the role of the teacher in experiential learning is that the teacher is responsible for both knowledge of the subject matter and knowledge of the individual learners. Knowledge of individual learners is important to determine the environment that experiences take place so that they are within the capacities and within the range of previous experiences of their learners.

As with any educational activity, planning for experiential learning is important. However, planning for experiential learning is more difficult than planning for traditional education. Of critical importance, the teacher must recognize the surroundings that are conducive to experiences that lead to growth. The key to experiential learning is selecting the correct experiences for students. The teacher must also determine which direction an experience is headed. If necessary, the teacher can alter the experience to ensure the desired outcomes are reached. Dewey also indicates that teachers should take advantage of "teachable moments", but not rely on them to be the sole source of experience.

Unlike traditional education, experiential learning often has considerable amount of student led activities. During this time, students are free to explore or experience the content of the lesson. A role of the teacher is to determine the appropriate amount of this free activity. Opponents of Dewey's theory assert that this free activity is chaotic and counter productive to education. Dewey counters that, "there cannot be complete quietude in a laboratory or

workshop" (1938, p.63). This teacher facilitated free activity is very beneficial to student learning.

Learner Readiness

Critical the Dewey's theory is that the experience must be within the ability of the learner and the learner must be prepared to learn. He argues that anything that can be called a study must be developed from within the scope of ordinary life experiences. When discussing the benefits of experiential education, Dewey states that, "it is a cardinal precept of the newer school of education that the beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have"(1938, p.74). Thus all future instruction should be based on the prior experiences of the learners.

Dewey asserts that failure to teach to the abilities of the students makes learning accidental. Therefore, the teacher should be aware of the capacities, needs, and past experiences of those under instruction. Dewey also argues that education should correspond with the natural mental and physical growth of the child. As such, he asserts that experiential education is in alignment with the principles of growth, as opposed to traditional education, which is not. When preparing students for an experience, it is also important to know that some students come to school in a state of mind that inhibits learning.

Dewey recognized that students are individuals with differing situations and needs. Education by experience can facilitate individualized instruction that meets the needs of individual students. Experiential education gives students the freedom to interact with the content being learned. Dewey proposes that the amount of freedom required by learners varies. Typically, less freedom is needed as a learner matures. An added benefit of giving learners

freedom is that this allows the teacher to gain insight into their readiness. Therefore, the readiness and previous experiences of the learners are important for experiential education.

Experience

"I assume that amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (Dewey, 1938, p.25). This quote adequately sums Dewey's devout belief in the relationship between experience and education. He goes further to say that, "...there is an intimate and necessary relation between the proves of actual experience and education" (Dewey, 1938, p.20).

Dewey asserts that experience is the foundation for everything in life. Accordingly, he proposes that civilized people learn from their experiences, which allow them to shape future experiences. Experiences also influence the condition under which future experiences are had. Thus the prior experiences of a student are directly related to their future capacity to learn. Therefore, care must be taken to extract the full meaning of each present experience. New experiences should be related to previous experiences; however, they should be sufficiently unfamiliar to the learners to cause a conflict between what is currently known and what needs to be learned. Dewey cautions that the starting point of experiential education is not the organized knowledge of the adults.

Dewey clearly advocates experiential learning. However, he argues that all experiences are not educative. He uses the term mis-educative to describe an experience that actually arrests or distorts future learning. His position was that, "everything depends on the quality of the experience which is had" (Dewey, 1938, p.27). For experiences to be educative, they must lead out into the real world. Thus, experiences lead to the ability to transfer knowledge to new

situations. Dewey further delineates between good and bad experiences by proposing that an intelligent activity is differentiated from other activity in that it involves a selection of means and their arrangement to reach an intended aim. Thus an educative experience is one that leads to an anticipated educational outcome.

The type of experience is critical for experiential learning to take place. Dewey states that, "no experience is educative that does not tend both to knowledge of more facts and entertaining of more ideas and to a better, a more orderly, arrangement of them" (Dewey, 1938, p.82). The subject matter, methods of instruction, the discipline, available materials, and social organization of the school should be considered when planning experiences. During an experience, the formation of purposes involves observing surrounding conditions, knowledge of what has happened in similar situations, and judgment that puts together what is observed and what is recalled. Of major importance, during an experience, there should be brief opportunities for reflection. This allows students to make the connection between the actual experience and the knowledge they draw from the experience.

Learning Outcomes

A key component of Dewey's theory is that memorization of a set of facts does not constitute learning. Mere acquisition of knowledge from traditional education does not guarantee that students will be able to apply those skills in dissimilar situations. Thus, the ability to transfer that knowledge to new situations is critical. Mis-educative experiences can have the potential of creating automaticity, yet they may inhibit future learning. This automaticity can also limit the capacity to act in a new situation.

Dewey also proposes that learning from experiential education facilitates the ability to be a life-long learner. As such, he asserts that extracting the full meaning from present experiences allows students to do the same in future experiences. Learning involves acquisition of knowledge and the ability to acquire more knowledge in new situations. To accomplish this, student involvement in an experience is very important. Dewey states that, "…there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active co-operation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying" (1938, p.67). Thus, experiential education has the ability to provide students with knowledge and the ability to apply that knowledge in many situations.

Summary

In Dewey's experiential learning theory, everything occurs within a social environment. Knowledge is socially constructed and based on experiences. This knowledge should be organized in real life experiences that provide a context for the information. The teacher's role is to organize this content and to facilitate the actual experiences. The experiences are based on the capabilities and readiness of the learners. The quality of the experience is the most important component of the theory. Upon completion of an experience, learners have the knowledge and the ability to apply it in differing situations. Thus, they have created new knowledge and are at a different level of readiness for continued acquisition and construction of new knowledge.

Reference

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

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